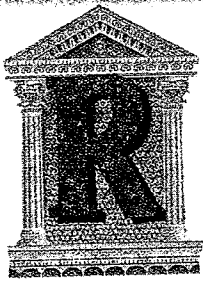


6 The Golden Age of Athens



rise of the Athenian Empire The Greeks' unexpected victory in the Persian Wars ensured that the Greek city-states would remain free and independent. The war also established Athens and Sparta as the two leading Greek city-states.

The Spartans had fought bravely at Thermopylae and led the army during the final victory at Plataea. The Athenians had triumphed against all odds at Marathon and defeated the Persian fleet during the naval battle of Salamis.

Although Athens and Sparta worked together during the war, they pursued separate paths as soon as the war was over. The Spartans hurried home to keep an eye on the helots. Meanwhile, Athens began building a mighty empire.

At the end of the war, many of the Greek city-states feared that the Persians might try to invade again. They wanted to form a league to defend themselves against such an invasion. In 478 B.C. an alliance known as the Delian (DEE lee un) League was established. Sparta declined to participate in the Delian League, so Athens ended up playing the leading role in the alliance.

Each of the city-states in the Delian League agreed to send money or ships to support the league. Athens decided how much money and how many ships each city-state had to send.

Gradually, Athens began treating the other members of the league

less like allies and more like colonial subjects. Other city-states were made to swear a loyalty oath to Athens, and they were not allowed to resign from the league.

Income from the Delian League helped fund what is now known as the Golden Age of Athens. During this 75-year period, which lasted from the end of the Persian Wars in 479 B.C. until the end of the Peloponnesian (pell uh pen EE shun) War in 404 B.C., Athens produced some of the greatest artistic and cultural achievements the world has ever known.

Pericles

One of the leading citizens of Athens during its Golden Age was Pericles (495–429 B.C.). For nearly 30 years Pericles (PER ih kleez) was repeatedly reelected as one of the ten *strategoi*, or generals. Eventually, he became the most powerful and influential man in Athens.

One of the keys to Pericles' success was his skill as an orator, or public speaker. One of his biographers said that his words were "like thunder and lightning." When Pericles advocated a measure, the Assembly usually went along with him. Thus, although Pericles was technically only one citizen among many, he soon emerged as the leader of the Athenian city-state.

Pericles was well known for his hard work and dedication. It was said that he was never seen walking on any road besides the ones that led to government buildings. He did not believe in wasting time at parties and social events. He was

rumored to have attended only one party during his lifetime—and then he left early.

Athens reached its greatest height of accomplishments under the leadership of Pericles.

The British Museum/New York Public Library

Under Pericles the Athenian empire continued to grow stronger. Pericles led armies in victorious campaigns, helped keep the other members of the Delian League in line, and supervised the establishment of a number of Athenian colonies. He also convinced the Assembly to build bigger and stronger walls to protect Athens from attack. Particularly important were the so-called long walls that stretched from Athens to the nearby seaport of Piraeus (pye REE us). Without these walls an attacking army could surround the city and cut off its food supplies. With the walls it would be possible for the Athenian navy to bring in food supplies from overseas, even during a siege. (This was why Athens had to have a powerful navy.)

Pericles also strengthened Athenian democracy. Prior to his time, poor Athenians were often unable to participate in government. As citizens they had the right to do so. However, since government work (including jury duty) did not pay, a poor citizen often could not afford to leave his paying job and accept an unpaid government position. Pericles convinced the Athenians to pay citizens for government work, thus opening the Athenian democracy to a wider range of citizens.

Pericles is perhaps best remembered as a patron of the arts. He supported dramatists, painters, sculptors, and architects. In 449 B.C. Pericles suggested that Athens rebuild the temples

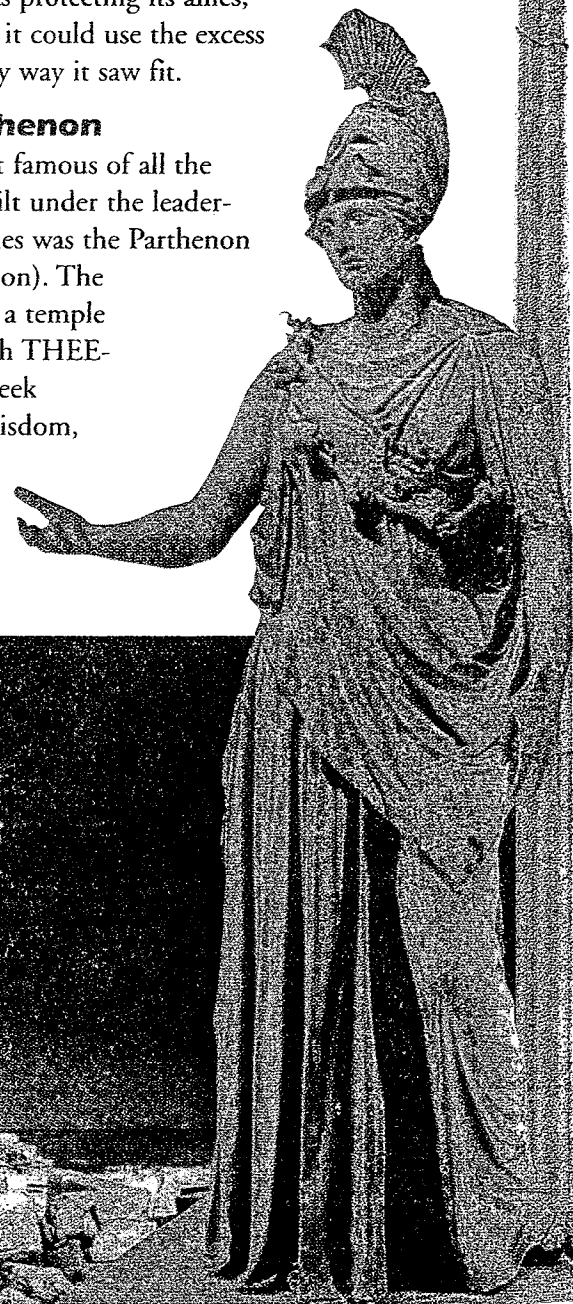
and public buildings in the Acropolis, a complex of buildings on a bluff overlooking the city. The Athenian Acropolis had been destroyed during the Persian Wars. Rebuilding it would be an expensive project, but Pericles had a plan. He said the Athenians could take some of the money they were getting from their allies in the Delian League and channel it into this important architectural project.

This proved to be a controversial idea. Many of the members of the Delian League complained that it was unfair to use their money to beautify Athens, and even some Athenians questioned the strategy. Pericles used Athenian military power to make the other Greek city-states accept his plan. He used his oratorical skills to convince the Athenians that his plan was acceptable. As long as Athens was protecting its allies, Pericles said, it could use the excess money in any way it saw fit.

The Parthenon

The most famous of all the buildings built under the leadership of Pericles was the Parthenon (PAR thuh non). The Parthenon is a temple to Athena (uh THEE-nuh), the Greek goddess of wisdom, for whom

Standing on a hill, the Parthenon is visible for miles around. The spiritual center of ancient Greece, it was built to honor the goddess Athena, on the right.



the city of Athens was named. Built between 447 and 432 B.C., the Parthenon is considered the greatest of all Greek buildings and one of the treasures of human culture. Although badly damaged by an explosion in the late 1600s (when it was being used to store gunpowder during a war), the Parthenon still stands, as it has for 2,500 years, and thousands of tourists travel to Athens each year to see it.

To design and build the Parthenon, Pericles recruited two leading architects. He wanted them to build a temple that would honor Athena but also serve as a symbol of the wealth, power, and prosperity of Athens. They did not let him down. The two designed a rectangular building larger than any other temple on the mainland of Greece. It was roughly 230 feet long, 100 feet wide and 60 feet high. More than 20,000 tons of marble were used in the construction process.

On each of the four sides of the building, the architects placed a colonnade, or row of columns. This was a strategy that many Greek architects before them had used. Indeed, the Greeks were so fond of columns that they eventually developed three styles of architecture, each of which was based on a distinctive kind of column. These three styles, or orders, were called Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

The Doric (DAWR ihk) column was the oldest and simplest of the three. It featured a large ridged column with a capital, or top, shaped like a saucer. The Ionic (eye AHN ihk)

style of column was tall and slender with spiral scroll-like curlicues on either side of the capital. The Corinthian (kuh RIHN thee un) column was the most ornate. The capital on top of a Corinthian column looks like a basket with layers of leaves in it.

The architects used Doric columns for the Parthenon, and the building they designed is widely considered to be one of the finest examples of Doric architecture ever built.

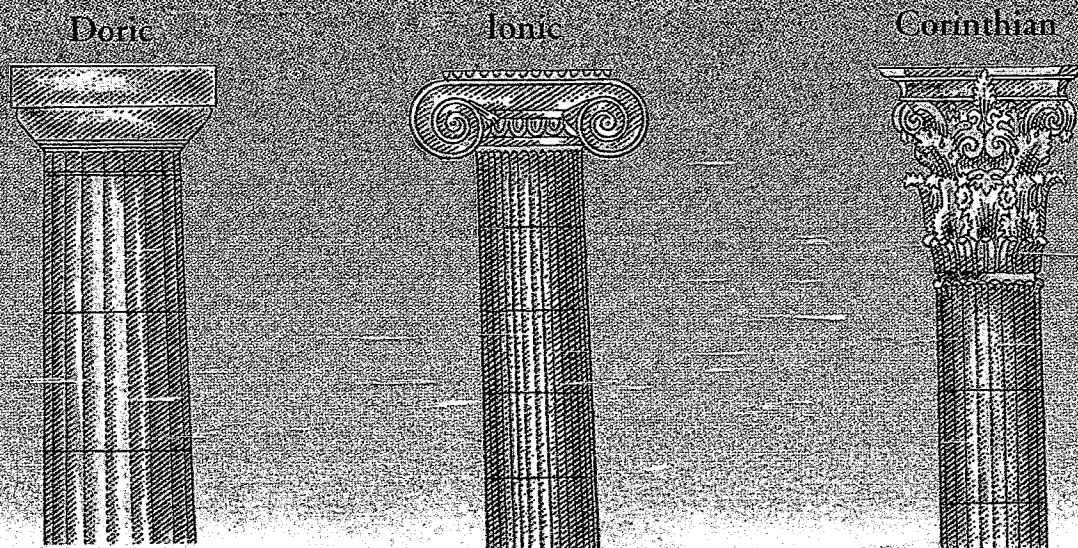
The carvings on the sides of the temple were done by an artist named Pheidias (FIHD ee us), the most famous sculptor of ancient Greece. He worked with his students and stonemasons from all over Greece to create them. The carvings depicted mythological battles between gods and mortals and religious ceremonies.

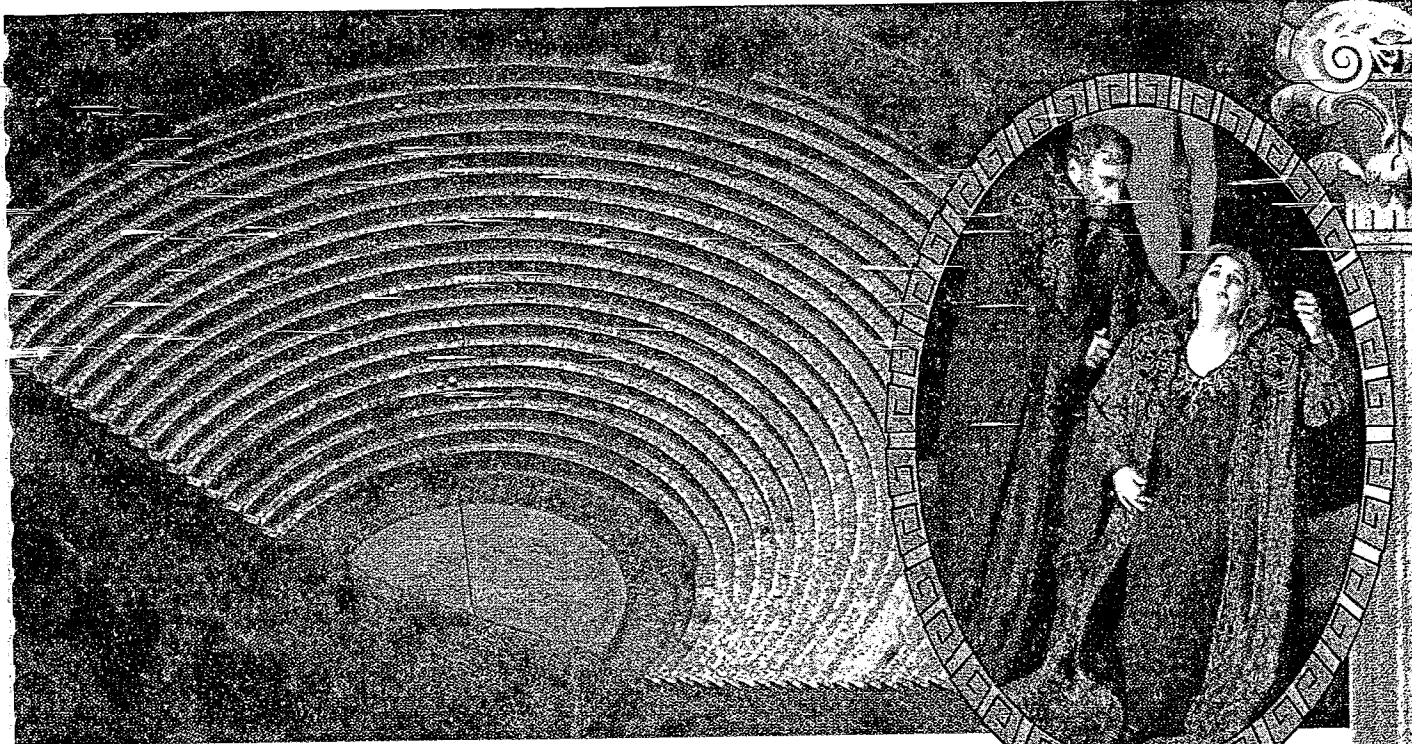
Inside the temple the ceiling was high enough to hold a 40-foot-tall statue of Athena. This statue, also made by Pheidias, was covered with ivory and gold. (The ivory was used for the skin of the goddess and the gold for her clothing.) The statue cost even more than the building that housed it. Unfortunately, it was destroyed in ancient times, though a small copy has survived.

Greek Drama

Athenian architects also built large outdoor theaters for dramatic performances. The most important Athenian theater was the Theater of Dionysus, located below the Acropolis, not far from the Parthenon. In this semicircular, open-air theater, 15,000 Athenians gathered.

The ancient Greeks used three different styles of columns for their buildings.





Greek amphitheaters were designed so that even a whisper on stage could be heard from every seat. Today, modern audiences still respond to the plays of ancient Greece. Pictured here is a performance of Sophocles' play, "Oedipus the King," staged in Rome in 2000.

Like the Olympics, Greek drama began as part of a religious festival. In this case it was a festival in honor of the Greek god of wine, Dionysus (dye uh NYE sus). At first a chorus of men danced around the altar of Dionysus, singing in honor of the god. Gradually, performances became more complex. At first a single actor was introduced to supplement the chorus; then additional actors were included, to allow for dialogue. Eventually, Greek drama began to look a lot like what we think of as a play.

Just as Greek athletes were given prizes for athletic excellence at the Olympics, so Athenian playwrights were given prizes for excellence in the Theater of Dionysus. Each year several dramatists would present plays, and a panel of judges would give prizes for the best plays.

The performances were paid for by wealthy men like Pericles and acted by Athenian citizens. According to one estimate, as many as 3,000 citizens performed in the festival each year. So it seems that most Athenian citizens would have served their city not only in government but also on the stage.

The Athenian dramatists invented two kinds of drama that are still important today: comedy and tragedy. Comedies were funny plays with happy endings, and tragedies were serious plays with sad endings. Comedies often addressed contemporary issues; tragedies were usually based on well-known Greek myths. The most famous comic playwright was Aristophanes (ar ih STAHF uh neez). The most famous tragic playwrights were Aeschylus (ES kih lus), Sophocles (SAHF uh kleez), and Euripides (yoo RIHP uh deez).

The Big Four

Aeschylus, who was born around 525 B.C. was the oldest of the four major Athenian dramatists. He was old enough to have fought against the Persians. When the Persian Wars were over, he became the leading dramatist of his day. In 474 B.C. Aeschylus wrote a play about the Persian Wars. This play was sponsored by Pericles himself. Later, Aeschylus wrote a famous **trilogy** called *The Oresteia* (awr es TYE uh).

vocabulary
trilogy a group of three related dramatic or literary works

According to legend, one scene in this trilogy so terrified the audience in the Theater of Dionysus that children went into convulsions and pregnant women had miscarriages! Aeschylus wrote more than 80 plays, all told. Unfortunately, only seven of these plays have survived.

Sophocles was 30 years younger than Aeschylus. When Aeschylus and the Athenian navy defeated the Persians at Salamis, Sophocles was only a teenager. However, because of his boyish good looks and dramatic skills, he was chosen to play a leading role in a dramatic performance celebrating the victory. Later, Sophocles began writing plays as well. He and Aeschylus became dramatic rivals, competing for top honors during the festivals of Dionysus. Sophocles also played a role in public affairs.

Sophocles' most famous play is called *Oedipus the King*. This play tells the story of Oedipus (ED ih pus), a legendary ruler who, without realizing what he is doing, kills his father and marries his mother. When Oedipus discovers the terrible truth, he cries out and blinds himself. Oedipus is a tragic figure who reminds us that we are not always as completely in control of our own lives as we might like to think.

The last of the great tragic playwrights was Euripides, who was born around 485 B.C. Euripides produced 80 or 90 plays. Although he won fewer prizes than Aeschylus and Sophocles, he was popular with Athenian audiences and is widely admired today for his psychological insights.

The great master of Athenian comedy was Aristophanes, who lived from 445 to around 380 B.C. In his plays, Aristophanes made fun of statesmen like Pericles, dramatists like Euripides, and philosophers like Socrates (SAHK ruh teez), whom you will meet in Lesson 8.

Athenian drama was an astonishing achievement. The plays are so powerful and so well written that they are still performed and admired today.

Other Cultural Achievements

In addition to architecture and drama, a number of other arts also flourished during the Golden Age of Athens.

Athenian craftsmen produced distinctive pottery, including bowls, urns, and vases. Much of this pottery was decorated with pictures. The pictures showed episodes from mythology, religious rites, Olympic competitions, and everyday scenes. These decorated urns and vases were used to hold oils, foods, and beverages. They were sold all around the Greek world and beyond. Today, they are even more valuable than they were in the Golden Age. Museums display them for the beautiful scenes they show, and scholars use them to learn about everyday life in ancient Athens.

This age also gave the world two of its first historians. Herodotus (huh ROD uh tus) is often called the father of history. He wrote down the history of the Persian Wars, including the last stand at Thermopylae. Thucydides (thoo SIHD ih deez) told the story of the Peloponnesian War, which you will read about in the next lesson.

There were also advances in science and medicine. The famous doctor, Hippocrates (hih PAHK ruh teez), is considered the father of medicine. Hippocrates, who was born around 460 B.C., was one of the first to recognize that weather, drinking water, and location can play a role in people's health. He is chiefly remembered for the Hippocratic (HIHP uh krat ihk) oath, a pledge that doctors have been taking for almost 2,500 years. When new doctors recite the Hippocratic oath, they agree to use their medical skills only for the good of the patient: "I do solemnly swear . . . that into whatsoever house I shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick."

Pericles was so proud of Athenian culture that he described the city as "an education for Greece," and not only for Greece, but for all time. When one considers all the achievements of this era—beautiful temples and theaters, raucous comedies and heartbreaking tragedies, stylish vases and urns, groundbreaking historical writings, and important medical advances—it is hard not to agree. The Golden Age of Athens was truly one of the greatest periods in the history of human culture.